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Santa Rosa Creek restoration project gets \$2 million grant

(Santa Rosa, CA) — The project to restore and enhance Santa Rosa Creek in downtown Santa Rosa moved one step closer to completion this week with a \$2 million grant from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), a division of the United States Department of Agriculture.

The Prince Memorial Greenway, Phase III, project will restore steelhead habitat, maintain flood capacity, promote public access, establish open space linkages and further the creation of a multi-use urban park along the stretch of Santa Rosa Creek from A Street to Santa Rosa Ave. The project is a joint effort of the City of Santa Rosa, Sonoma County Water Agency and Sotoyome Resource Conservation District to restore the creek, which was channelized for flood control decades ago.

“The original Sonoma Creek Watershed project served a flood protection purpose that was appropriate at the time. Now we are pleased to partner with progressive local leaders and project sponsors to help make this watershed restoration project a reality,” said NRCS State Conservationist Chuck Bell.

Under the terms of the grant, NRCS will fund 50 percent of the project costs that are directly related to fish and wildlife restoration, up to \$2 million. According to Mike Sheppard, a senior planner with the City of Santa Rosa, the funds will pay to remove concrete riprap on the south bank and on the bottom of the creek; restore the channel to its natural bank and bottom

with riffles and gravel suitable for spawning; and install root wads for fish habitat and native vegetation, including riparian trees to overhang the creek and provide shade. The channel also will be deepened by four feet, to allow for cooler water and increase the capacity of the channel.

“This gets us very close to completing the Prince Memorial Greenway. It’s been the city’s dream for 14 years, and now we’re almost there,” said Steve Rabinowitsh, a member of the Santa Rosa City Council and a longtime advocate of the Prince Memorial Greenway project. “The other members of the city council all helped to move the effort along, in particular Noreen Evans.”

Credit for securing the grant goes to Rep. Lynn Woolsey (D-Petaluma), who brought the restoration project to the attention of the local NRCS representatives and helped guide the application through the federal agency. “Funding for the Prince Memorial Greenway Project will help the city’s efforts to restore natural habitat and protect threatened species while also promoting bike transportation and helping to revitalize downtown Santa Rosa,” said Rep. Woolsey. “This is an urban creek project that will continue to be a national model for other communities to follow.”

Phase III is the last phase of the Prince Memorial Greenway project. Phase I, from Railroad Square to Highway 101, was completed in 2001, at a cost of about \$5.5 million. Phase II, from Highway 101 to A Street, was completed in summer of 2002, with a final cost of about \$4 million. A portion of Phase III, including the removal of concrete, restoration and the installation of the recreation trail on the north bank, was completed in spring 2003. When complete in fall 2004, Phase III will have cost an estimated \$11 million.

The Phase III funding has come from a variety of sources, including \$4 million from the Sonoma County Open Space District, \$1 million from Sonoma County Water Agency, the \$2 million NRCS grant, \$1 million from the state Department of Water Resources Urban Streams Restoration Grant program and \$500,000 from California State Parks. Project staff applied for an additional \$2 million in Prop. 40 funding and a \$1 million Coastal Conservancy grant.

“By taking advantage of the state and federal funding programs, we’ve not had to use any general fund monies,” Sheppard said. “Most grant programs today are set up to fund projects that

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Santa Rosa Creek

are designed and permitted, and have community support. If we hadn't had this project ready to go, the community wouldn't get this money. It would have gone to Southern California or elsewhere in the state."

The water agency and the conservation district were the original partners on the Central Sonoma Watershed Work Plan, along with the NRCS. In the 1950s and 1960s, the creek was channelized for flood control. That channelization project was never closed. When the city and the water agency spoke with NRCS about funding for restoration, it became a matter of agreeing to amend the scope of the original project to include fish and wildlife restoration, as opposed to recommending a new project.

"We are grateful to both Sen. Dianne Feinstein and to Rep. Woolsey for their help in securing this funding. This has truly been a cooperative effort among the involved agencies," said Tim Smith of the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors, which also serves as the Board for the water agency. "For our part, I'm proud that the water agency has provided the land for the project, as well as more than \$1 million in funding and administrative services."

The restoration project has been in the works since the early 1990s. The initial funding came from the Santa Rosa Redevelopment Agency and from a trust set up by the Prince Family. The Prince Memorial Greenway includes 2/3 mile of trail, connecting downtown Santa Rosa to Railroad Square. In 2002, the city received an Award of Excellence from the California Park and Recreation Society for the planning of Phase I.

Sonoma County Water Agency provides water supply, flood control and sanitation services for the County of Sonoma. Visit us on the Web at www.sonomacountywater.org.

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